Re-examining Oppression and Resistance in the Selected Works of Mahasweta Devi

A Synopsis

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Introduction

Oscar Wilde once famously quoted, “Literature anticipates life. It does not copy it but moulds it to its purpose.” (11) These words hold true for the fictional works of Mahasweta Devi, because her fictional works are fictional only in the sense of re-storying, the ethos and the commitment behind the stories remain true to the lives she depicts. In her fiction, she represents the deplorable condition of tribals and other lesser privileged communities of the Indian society. These are retellings of certain lives who hail from severely marginalized communities, who are suffering from myriad forms of exploitation and subjugation. Considered as one of the weakest sections of Indian reality, these individuals are victims of social and economic exploitation, caste oppression, and gender discrimination.

While mentioning this predominant trope of Mahasweta Devi’s writing, Vandana Gupta in her book *Mahasweta Devi: A Critical Writing* writes, “Mahasweta’s fiction is not fantasy, nor is it pastoral romance. It is firmly rooted in the ground reality, in the solidity of facts. Detailed documentation goes into making of the narrative. What redeems her ideological biases is this anchoring in facts, empirical and material truths of life. She does not take a tangential view of reality for as a hard-core realist, she believes fiction must stem from actual, historical facts. Authenticity of fiction is the first condition for its effective application for activist purposes. Mahasweta’s fiction begins with a fact- profile of either an area or a character or a local practice, before it snowballs into a gripping story.” (20)

The characters in Devi’s stories are subjected to multi-faceted structures of exploitation and oppression and yet they stand firm against all forms of injustice with a brazen spirit and formulate a resistance unlike no other. In this synopsis, I intend to study the workings of

oppression in the fictional world of Mahasweta Devi and how these stories unify to form resistance literature.

Oppression is most often perpetuated through and within the social structure of human societies, and while the injustice meted out to the victim may cause his fall it is always at the expense of the rise of another individual or community. Resistance of underprivileged communities such as adivasis and dalits against all forms of societal oppression are thus symbolic in nature because they pertain to the community and not just the individual in question. While theorizing Oppression Cudd opines that, “Oppression is a social injustice… perpetrated through social institutions, practices, and norms on social groups by social groups… the concept of resistance... signify intentions and concrete actions taken to oppose others and refuse to accept their ideas, actions and positions for a variety of reasons...” (23)

Resistance can be defined as the act of opposing or fighting against something that is perceived as oppressive, unjust or harmful. It involves standing up against the injustice that the people faces, in terms of social, political or cultural. It also refers to the struggle for liberation and right.

In the works of Mahasweta Devi, resistance finds many forms. Some of them are rebellion, protest, struggle for survival, resistance against the caste system. Resistance challenges the dominant people of the society or the thought that those people have by fighting against the injustice and the discrimination.

Literature Review

In the recent years, research in the field of subaltern studies and specifically the writings of Mahasweta Devi have burgeoned. Critics and academicians have studied different aspects of

exploitation and activism in the writings of Mahasweta Devi. Gayatri Spivak's, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (1987)* can be ascertained as the first extant work on the life and writings of Mahasweta Devi. This particular book translated by Spivak, brings to the world stage the genius of Mahasweta Devi.

One another book on Devi, titled *Mahasweta Devi: Critical Perspectives* (2011) edited by Radha Chakravarty contains critical essays based on the literary writings of Mahasweta Devi and the latter part of the book contains activist writings by Devi herself.

G. K. Sundarapandiyan in his critique of *Rudali* (2017), where he studies caste and class disabilities in the fiction of Mahasweta Devi, talks about the existence and growth of Hindu class system from time immemorial up until the present day. This caste structure of Indian society is classified into four *varnas*. This age old tradition was earlier based on the profession of an individual but later became hereditary. Sundarapandiyan while discussing all of these formulations of caste and class interweaves the fiction of Mahasweta Devi to portray the world of the disempowered and the downtrodden sections of the society.

Ruchi Bisht in *Significance of Mahasweta Devi's writings from an Ecofeminist and Socioeconomic Perspectives: A Critical Study* (2021), shows how people are dependent upon the forest for their livelihood. Women are exploited by the trader and the same is also the one who exploits the forest resources.

Research Gap

The existing body of research on Mahasweta Devi uses the theoretical frameworks from various standpoints such as feminism, postcolonialism and subaltern studies but the selected novels and short stories have not been investigated from the lens of oppression, violence and resistance. This proposed thesis will help to better understand the fictional world

of Mahasweta Devi in terms of the caste politics, and the interplay of oppression and resistance which as themes are often sidelined. This caveat in the study of Mahasweta Devi is what I seek to address in the proposed research.

Problems to be Investigated

Mahasweta Devi presents the lives of these less than ordinary men and women and the sufferings that they undergo on a daily basis. This study explores the issues of oppression and resistance by analyzing the select works of Mahasweta Devi. One of the primary concerns of this proposed dissertation is to study the major preoccupation behind the writings of Devi. Oppression of the subjugated groups and their voice of resistance forms the main narrative structure of Mahasweta Devi's works. I propose to study these aspects primarily to understand how Devi formulates an ethical standpoint from which an Achebean 'balance of stories' is achieved.

These literary works depict the condition of the tribal people or the marginalized as a result of exploitation of their natural and human resources by colonizers and domestic capitalists. Her writings serve as a weapon against the elite and tears down the glorifiednarrative of development of Indian society. Her writings provide a unique window into the sorrow and pain of the underprivileged, and neglected people. Her writing works as an instrument against exploitation of these people.

Aims and Objectives of Research

- To discover the evils of caste system as portrayed by Mahasweta Devi
- To understand the intricacies of oppression and its interplay with resistance
- To identify the various forms of resistance as a human response
- To discover the multiple forms of oppression of the Dalit and Adivasi women

- To understand the cultural hegemony which is at play in the narrative of Mahasweta Devi

Hypothesis

After thorough reading and analysis of the selected texts of Mahasweta Devi, I would have been able to draw a better understanding of the subject position of the subaltern in the writings of Mahasweta Devi. Towards the end of the study I expect to lay out the dominant ideologies behind the oppression of the dalits and tribals. At the same time resistance against the dominant communities, which takes several forms which will also become clear once the texts are analyzed as a whole. Devi also had an active engagement with the underprivileged sections of Eastern India and by the end of this research, I would have been able to explore the causes and remedies which Devi formulates in her fictional writings.

Research Methodology

This proposed study will analyze the themes of oppression and resistance in the writings of Mahasweta Devi. For this study, I have found qualitative approach to be best suited. Through this approach a better understanding can be sought for the character arcs drawn by Devi and at the same time a comprehensive knowledge can be gathered of the world she wants to portray. I propose to engage in close reading of the texts to better understand the oeuvre of Mahasweta Devi's writing. She has a host of fictional as well as non-fictional works (activist writings) to her credit. In the course of my study, I would hence look at her activist writings as well for reference because that would bring out the ethical interventions behind her writing, as stated by Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak*?

Aspects from feminist literary theory and specifically Dalit feminism will also form the crux of the study since her stories narrate the horrors of female lives from the marginalized Indian communities. Mahasweta Devi has often been identified as a writer with

Marxist leanings and located within the ambit post-colonialism as well. Hence, this thesis will also take up these theoretical standpoints to better understand the psyche behind her writings and the resultant effect.

Research Tools

This proposed research will advance a qualitative method of investigation and in doing so, it will primarily look at close reading of the texts selected for the study. To enhance the literary analysis, it will rely on literary theoretical frameworks of feminism, postcolonialism and critical race theory. In addition to her writing prowess, Devi has had a significant contribution in tribal alleviation projects and hence, this proposed research will also look to study the life of the author to better understand her work and the time she lived in.

Plan of Work

It is anticipated that the proposed thesis will be divided into following chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 3: Conceptualizing the Caste system in Indian Society

Chapter 4: Locating Oppression in Mahasweta Devi's Works

Chapter 5: Voicing Resistance in Mahasweta Devi's Works

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Bibliography

Chapter 1- Introduction

Mahasweta Devi, prominent postcolonial Indian writer and social activist who raised her voice about the social issues that existed in the society. She has written hundred novels and over 20 collections of short stories including political piece, novels, plays and children fiction. She mainly wrote about the marginalized or subaltern who were subjugated by the society. Through her work she has presented the struggle of the common people which included landless labourers, tribals, oppressed woman and tried to show the real cause of their problem. She informs her audience about her source of inspiration to be the real history of ordinary people. Her writing, she says, is fueled by the ones who are exploited and yet stand resilient to all such forms of oppression. This spirit of resilience becomes the endless source to her writings which is documented in local folklore, ballads, myths and legends which gets transferred from one generation to another. (Hindustan times 19 Aug, 2019)

In her work, we could find issues like exploitation, suppression, bonded labour and many more. As a social activist she worked for the rights and empowerment of the marginalised. The stories she has presented in her work are based on her own experience which she has collected from the people with whom she had worked. Her first work was a novel, titled *Jhansir Rani*, story based on the life of Jhansi which was published in the year 1956. Some of her important works are *Mother of 1084* (1974), *Aranyer Adhikar* (*Rights Over the Forest*, 1977), *Imaginary Maps* (1993), *Bashai Tudu* (1990), *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* (2002).

Her writing had the power which pulled the attention of many towards her work. She tried to bring the evils that existed in the society even after the Independence that we got from the British rule. This chapter will introduce the author in question and shed light both on her literary as well as her activist career. It will also introduce the major points of discussion of the proposed thesis.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This second chapter of the proposed synopsis is titled Literature Review. This chapter will lay to the fore the major works taken up for this study. This chapter will seek to draw a better understanding of the stories before they are taken up for thematic analysis in the subsequent chapters.

The play, *Water* is part of the collection of plays titled *Five Play*s. It is divided into 14 scenes. This is a story about the dynamics of caste politics based on the distribution of water resources in the village of the untouchables. A natural element such as water is at the center of debate between the elites and the untouchables and the story perfectly illustrates the exploitation and discrimination based on the caste.

Gandhi Maidan and Raghua Dusad is a short story from *Wrong Number and Other Stories*. The story takes place on the outskirts of Kanera where seven Dusad families lived. The place which no one cared and no one bothered about.

Mahasweta Devi's *Outcaste: Four Stories* translated by Sarmistha Dutta Gupta presents stories of the marginalized dalits and tribals. Class discrimination and female exploitation forms the crux of this anthology. The acute observation and perceptive nature of Mahasweta Devi brings forth characters who activate their agency to survive against the unending class, caste and gender oppression.

Chotti Munda and His Arrow is one of the well-known novels originally written in Bengali and later translated by Gayatri Spivak in 2022. The protagonist of the epic story is Chotti Munda. In the decades that Chotti, the main character, lives through India, transitions from colonial control to Independence and finally to the turbulence of the 1970s. It explores and reveals the intricate network of power-based social and economic transactions. It chronicles the shifts in a marginalized individual's everyday life. This 1980 book is noteworthy in addition for

the way it addresses important topics that have developed into pressing social challenges in the years that have passed. It calls into doubt the indigenous people's position with regard to national identity, land and human rights.

The story of *Rudali* revolves around the journey of the main character from being 'Sanichari' to being 'Choto Ma'. Born into a lower caste the story follows the life of the protagonist Sanichari, her friendship with Bikhni, the tribulations that they suffer and the resistance that they form. Tribal women have often been sidelined as relegated characters, this story is in stark contrast to all such previous portrayals. This story narrates the hunger of the Ganju people and the lengths that they can go to keep themselves from dying.

Bashai Tudu, a novelette by Mahasweta Devi evokes a modern myth of a tribal peasant revolutionary who appears whenever the landless farm laborers are driven to a crisis and leads them to revolt, gets killed and appears again. A story of alternative forms of resistance this story has elements of magic realism wherein Devi presents the unity and strength of the tribals.

Chapter 3 - Conceptualizing the Indian Caste system through the lens of Mahasweta Devi

The caste system which has had an everlasting presence in the sociopolitical history of India occupies the cynosure of Devi's writings. She focusses on this age-old structure of classification of species which results in continuous oppression and marginalization of the subjugated sections of Indian society such as the dalits and adivasis. In stories such as *Dhouli* and *Gandhi Maidan and Raghua Dusad* and in plays such as *Water*, we find these themes at the fore. In her quintessential unapologetic tone Devi portrays the subaltern traumatic experiences bearing forth from caste discrimination. This chapter will undertake these arguments pertaining to caste system and delve deeper into the fictional world of Mahasweta Devi to find answers. This chapter while studying the aforementioned texts, primarily, to gauge an understanding of the portrayal of caste system in the works of Devi, will also look at how her stories actually align

with other prominent Dalit writers of her times such as Namdeo Dhasal and Omprakash Valmiki. This is a deliberate attempt to position Devi in the narrative of Dalit assertion.

Chapter 4 - Locating Oppression in Mahasweta Devi's Works

Existing research has focused mostly on oppression of women. While sexual violence of the underprivileged women at the hands of the elites find voice in shorter narratives such as *Dhouli, The Hunt* and *Draupadi*, but oppression of marginalized in the works of Mahasweta Devi takes several forms. For instance, In *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*, oppression of the tribals stems out of land issues and encroachment by the zamindars. Similarly, in the short story titled *Salt* we find how an everyday item like salt weaves a narrative of exploitation and oppression of Purti. This chapter will look into these multifarious aspects of oppression as pointed out by in her works.

Chapter 5 - Voicing Resistance in Mahasweta Devi's Works

The writings of Mahasweta Devi stand out in Indian literary imagination as a voice of the voiceless. Buoyed on by her activist movements and outreach programs, her stories present characters who even at their lowest form of human existence stand against violence and oppression. This chapter will look to study such characters presented in stories such as *Bashai Tudu* and *Rudali*, who showcase their brazen spirit against all forms of injustice and violence meted out to them. When talking about resistance in the works of Devi, these stories have not been studied in that vein. This chapter will thus analyze such stories wherein characters exhibit their strength and independence despite societal norms and restrictions.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

Through her writing, Mahasweta Devi presents the lopsided nature of Indian society, built from the structure of caste system, which could be eye opening for the reader so that they could develop an understanding of the issues of the marginalized people face. Mahasweta Devi turned heads within the academia during her lifetime because of the veracity and relentless nature of her writing.

This chapter would try to deconstruct her form of writing. The last chapter which is the concluding chapter presents the key arguments of the dissertation in order to wrap up the investigation. It will seek to contextualize the dalit and tribal experience within the larger Indian literary imagination. This chapter also seeks to analyze the subjugated position of the subaltern population under the lens of oppression and resistance. In doing so it will attempt to study the multiple forms of oppression and marginalization which women from these communities face on a daily basis. The chapter will present the overall summation of the synopsis, comment upon the limitations of this research and highlight the future research prospects in this field of study.

Scope and Limitations of Work

The proposed dissertation titled Re-examining Oppression and Resistance in the works of Mahasweta Devi, explores the lived experiences of tribals and dalits from Eastern India, through the voice of Devi herself. The main focus in this study is to initiate an investigation along the fault lines of caste and class and how it impacts the lesser privileged sections of Indian society. Oppression of the subaltern takes multiple pathways in the fictional world of Devi and this thesis will attempt to study these structures and also identify the forms and ideologies which constitute the resistance against oppression. The texts which have been taken up for this study include:

1. *Five Plays*
2. *Wrong Number and Other Stories*
3. *Outcaste: Four Stories*
4. *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*
5. *Rudali*
6. *Bashai Tudu*

Significance of the Work

The work of Mahasweta Devi has a very significant role in the field of literature. She has represented herself as the voice of the tribal and marginalized people. She was also an activist so she had better understanding of the life of these people. While much of the research on her writings have explored fields of Feminism, Marxism and Nationalism, it has not delved into the politics of oppression and resistance of the dalit and adivasi characters. This proposed thesis will serve as a stepping stone to all such future studies in the field of writings from the margins.

Relevance to Present Day

Upon close reading of Mahasweta Devi's works, it can be understood that her work depicts the deplorable condition of the marginalized groups. Her work is a voice to the voiceless and hence this study is marked out as an instance of social justice. Often ignored by the mainstream, the tribals and dalits find centrality in her works which bring a balance of stories in the larger field Indian writing.

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